

## CONTROLLED CHOICE IN CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

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**C**ambridge, Massachusetts, a community of just over 100,000 persons, has traditionally viewed itself as being socially and politically progressive. Current residents are proud of the fact that two decades ago theirs was one of the first cities in the country to introduce a system of controlled choice for assigning students to schools. This policy was seen as a way to offer parents a voice in selecting their child's school without sacrificing the broader goals of the public education system as a whole, notably fairness and equity in access to quality schools.

The Cambridge plan has been widely viewed in the literature of school reform as a model of controlled choice. It is also one that has evolved in some significant ways over the past two decades, and in December 2001, the Cambridge School Committee\* took another bold step. After considerable debate and soul-searching regarding the values and purposes of public education, the committee voted to endorse a proposal from Superintendent Bobbi D'Allessandro to replace race with socioeconomic status as the primary criterion for achieving a balanced distribution of students throughout the system.

This paper documents the origins, evolution, and impact of controlled choice in Cambridge over the past two decades, with particular reference to why the school committee found itself considering the shift from race to socioeconomic status. The paper makes use of data supplied by the Office of Development and Assessment and other arms of the Cambridge public schools as well as interviews with senior

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\* Massachusetts describes those groups, known elsewhere as local school boards, as "school committees."

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administrative staff, members of the school committee, parents, teachers, and others. A review was carried out of academic studies of controlled choice in Cambridge, most notably those of Michael Alves, Charles Willie, and Gary Orfield, each of whom was interviewed in person. The author also attended a public hearing on the proposal to move to socioeconomic status, visited a “turnaround” school, and reviewed newspaper accounts and op-ed articles relating to the proposed change.

The basic conclusions that emerge from this study of controlled choice in Cambridge are as follows:

- u Controlled choice has for the most part succeeded in its primary objective of fostering racial diversity in Cambridge schools. There is a sense that although inequities persist, the plan has had a strong positive impact on the culture of the school system by promoting respect for the diversity on which the city prides itself.
- u Controlled choice has not had the positive impact on overall student achievement envisioned by its architects. As in other urban school systems, student achievement in Cambridge remains highly polarized. Academic success as measured by standardized test scores is strongly associated both with the race and ethnicity of students and with their socioeconomic background. Average test scores vary widely among the fifteen elementary schools, and the system is widely viewed as divided between “good” and “bad” schools. The Cambridge public school system is under intense pressure from the state of Massachusetts and local critics, especially members of minority groups, to narrow the achievement gaps that separate both schools and various groups of students.
- u One reason for persistent achievement gaps is that central authorities have not intervened to improve the quality of underchosen and underperforming schools. The theory of controlled choice holds that once patterns of parental choice become apparent, the central administration will intervene to enhance the quality of underchosen schools in order to make them more attractive and thereby to enhance the overall academic quality of the system. While school officials were diligent in creating new educational options, including numerous schools-within-schools, to satisfy parents who were not able to place their children in one of their first

three choices, they were much less aggressive about closing, reorganizing, or otherwise investing in underchosen and underachieving schools.

- u Another reason for lingering achievement problems is that while both race and socioeconomic status are associated with academic achievement, evidence from Cambridge and elsewhere suggests that socioeconomic status is the more important factor of the two. Policymakers in Cambridge thus argue that by switching from race to socioeconomic status as the primary basis for achieving diversity, the district will not only preserve diversity in the schools but also increase overall student achievement. They assert that, under the right conditions, creating socioeconomically diverse schools can enhance the performance of poor students while not adversely affecting that of middle-class students.

- u The policy change to the use of socioeconomic status as the primary basis of achieving diversity in enrollment patterns was also driven in part by court decisions banning race as a means of assigning pupils to schools. The superintendent of schools, legal counsel, and some members of the school committee fear that if the current race-oriented pupil assignment plan were to be thrown out by the courts, the city would cease to enjoy the numerous social, cultural, and other benefits that controlled choice has produced. Moving to socioeconomic status is seen as a legal way to preserve diversity.

Cambridge's two decades of experience with controlled choice suggest a three-part policy conclusion:

- u A well-designed controlled choice scheme can produce positive benefits, including giving parents a greater say in their child's education and promoting tolerance and diversity within the system.
- u A pupil assignment system organized around controlled choice is not likely, in and of itself, to enhance academic achievement in underchosen schools. Improving such schools requires using parental preferences as a guide to identifying schools that need direct intervention from the central administration.

- u Insofar as socioeconomic status is more strongly associated with academic achievement than race or ethnicity, it is possible that using socioeconomic status as a basis for promoting diversity through controlled choice could have more of a positive impact on academic achievement than was the case with a similar policy based on race.

## HISTORY OF CONTROLLED CHOICE IN CAMBRIDGE

Although known primarily as the home of Harvard and MIT, Cambridge, a 6.2-square-mile city on the shores of the Charles River, is actually a diverse, bustling urban area, one of the ten most densely populated cities in the country. The 101,000 residents range from prosperous occupants of stately eighteenth-century homes along Brattle Street and longtime residents of blue-collar neighborhoods to recent immigrants from Haiti or Cambodia. Cambridge citizens come from sixty-four different countries and have an estimated forty-six mother tongues.<sup>1</sup>

The Cambridge public school system consists of fifteen elementary schools through eighth grade<sup>2</sup> and one comprehensive high school. The district serves 7,308 students and employs more than 700 teachers and seventy-six administrators assisted by over 400 support personnel.<sup>3</sup>

Cambridge has also had a thriving nonpublic sector that during the 1950s and 1960s attracted more than half of the city's school-age children. Hundreds of Italian and Irish families opted for Roman Catholic parochial schools, while many wealthy residents patronized exclusive private schools such as Belmont Hill or Shady Hill. At the present time, there is one public charter school in the district and seven private elementary schools, including two Roman Catholic parochial schools.

Enrollment in Cambridge public schools rose significantly following the introduction of controlled choice in 1981, but it has been declining in recent years. Total enrollment in kindergarten through eighth grade elementary schools peaked at 6,083 pupils in 1994–95, but it was down to 5,172 in 2000–01 and is expected to continue to decline for the foreseeable future.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, Cambridge public schools reflect, indeed magnify, the diversity of the city as a whole. As shown in Table 1, whites, with 40 percent of the enrollment, account for a plurality of students in district elementary schools. African Americans account for 23 percent

of enrollment, followed by Hispanics (14 percent), Asians (11 percent), Other Blacks<sup>5</sup> (11 percent), and Native Americans (1 percent). Nearly half (48 percent) of students come from families poor enough to qualify for subsidized-price lunch under federal guidelines, and 12 percent are described as “limited English proficient.”<sup>6</sup>

Thirty-two percent of elementary school pupils come from homes where languages other than English are spoken, and the district runs two-way bilingual programs in Spanish and Portuguese and regular bilingual programs in Chinese and Korean. At a recent hearing, the school committee distributed summaries of the proposed new controlled choice plan in Chinese, Korean, Haitian/Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish as well as English.

TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHICS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN CAMBRIDGE,  
MASSACHUSETTS, 2000–2001 (PERCENTAGE)

	PORTION OF DISTRICT TOTAL	NATIVE AMERICAN	ASIAN	AFRICAN AMERICAN	HISPANIC	WHITE	OTHER BLACK	LUNCH
Agassiz	8	1	16	18	9	43	13	30
Cambridgeport	6	1	8	26	10	50	5	19
Fitzgerald	5	1	10	22	7	43	17	60
Graham and Parks	7	1	8	14	6	46	25	31
Haggerty	5	1	8	26	7	48	9	30
Harrington	10	0	3	21	12	48	15	77
Kennedy	10	2	3	17	43	32	5	64
King	5	0	21	31	10	24	14	79
King Open	6	1	14	26	5	49	5	25
Longfellow	8	0	10	20	26	35	9	53
Morse	7	0	26	25	8	35	6	51
New Academy	5	0	4	39	20	25	13	72
Peabody	8	1	24	17	4	46	8	25
Tobin	10	0	11	34	10	34	10	48
TOTAL	100	1	11	23	14	40	11	48

*Source:* Data obtained from Cambridge Public Schools Office of Development Assessment.

There are some recent signs, however, that Cambridge is now becoming somewhat less diverse. The 1999 report by the Office of Development and Assessment of Cambridge public schools on kindergarten enrollments concluded, "Cambridge appears to be moving gradually but detectably toward a more affluent, more highly educated and increasingly White population." Data from the first cycles of kindergarten applications showed a substantial increase in the proportion of white pupils, from 42 to 53 percent of entering kindergartners from 1996 to 1999, and a decline in the proportion of blacks and Hispanics, with the Asian proportion remaining steady. The report attributed the drop in black and Hispanic students primarily to the abolition of rent control in Cambridge in 1995, which forced some residents to move to less expensive areas.<sup>7</sup>

The report also found "a widening gap in income levels that may show a move toward bipolar socioeconomic groupings in Cambridge." The 1999 figures show drops in all income categories except that of families with incomes of \$50,000 or more, which rose from 36 to 47 percent of families with children entering kindergarten.

## The Introduction of Controlled Choice

Cambridge had always run its schools in traditional fashion. The wealthy bought homes in the Peabody or Agassiz school districts, and if they were politically savvy and aggressive and knew the right kind of people, they could get their children into one of the schools that came to be seen as aimed at the "academically talented." Residents who were poor, or who lived in one of Cambridge's working-class neighborhoods, had their own neighborhood schools and could enroll their children in Follow Through, a federally funded program designed with Head Start graduates in mind.

In the 1970s, Cambridge residents looked with horror across the Charles River at racial strife in Boston, which was struggling to desegregate its schools under a court-ordered busing system. Whites were fleeing the system, while buses carrying blacks into white ethnic neighborhoods were stoned. "It was a nightmare," recalled Mary Lou McGrath, the Cambridge superintendent from 1986 until 1997. "We kept asking ourselves, Are we next?"<sup>8</sup>

Cambridge already had its own problems. Despite the closing of several Catholic schools in the late 1960s, the number of white students

in the system was declining. The city had several schools that were on the edge of being ruled segregated, so political and educational leaders decided on a preemptive strike. Rather than run the risk of having a judge step in and order forced busing—with all the disruption, hassle, and embarrassment that would have entailed—they decided to try to lure students into integrated settings of their own free will through a system of parental choice.

A limited form of parental choice first became an option in 1972 with the opening of Cambridge Alternative Public School, which was created by parents and staff who wanted “open” classrooms and more progressive teaching than was available in neighborhood schools. In 1975, the Cambridge public school system used parental backing to launch another new developmental program, King Open, which operated as a separate school in the same building as King Elementary School. The founding of such schools was facilitated by the fact that the state provided 90 percent of the cost of new and renovated facilities when the school was part of a voluntary desegregation plan.

The first stab at full-scale open enrollment came in 1979 when the school committee, working with parents and teachers, adopted an open-enrollment option that gave all Cambridge students the option to transfer to schools outside their neighborhoods, so long as space was available and the change did not increase segregation. Although the district provided transportation, only a limited number of students opted to leave their neighborhood schools. The following year the zones determining the school to which students would be assigned to attend were redrawn to bring about more racial integration. Students already assigned to a neighborhood school were allowed to stay if they wished, but new students were assigned under the new rules. Once again, these efforts to encourage moves outside traditional enrollment zones failed to attract large numbers of takers.

In March 1981, the school committee concluded that bold action was required to bring about racial balance. It voted to abolish neighborhood zones entirely and to give *every* student a crack at attending *every* school, thus making Cambridge the first school district in the country to institute a policy of controlled choice. The hope was that this would not only head off a court order but also bring middle-class whites back into the public schools. For the first time, Cambridge schools would be competing not only with the private and parochial sector but also with each other.

## The Concept of Controlled Choice

The controlled choice policy in Cambridge, formally known as the Controlled Choice School Desegregation Plan, is intended to promote objectives described by Charles Willie, a consultant to the district and a leading proponent of the concept, in a 2000 article in the *Harvard Education Review*. He writes:

Controlled Choice plans are designed to include and treat fairly all students in all schools of a district. Moreover, they empower parents and their children by permitting them to choose schools of attendance; they promote diversity by way of enrollment-fairness guidelines that guarantee space in all schools for all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and other groups in the community; and they promote school improvement by using the choice data as a referendum on attractive and unattractive schools.<sup>9</sup>

Willie emphasizes that controlled choice is based on a principle of complementarity. That is, he writes, “It focuses as much attention on upgrading the worst as on promoting the best; it gives guidance on how to overcome failure as well as achieve success; it recognizes the value of freedom as well as constraint. In summary, Controlled Choice promotes excellence without compromising equity.”<sup>10</sup>

## How Controlled Choice Works in Cambridge

Cambridge public schools launched its controlled choice plan in 1981. The term “controlled choice” was adopted to signal that, while parents indicate their preferences, the school district makes the final decision. Parents of students in kindergarten through eighth grade gather information about the fifteen schools and then list their first four choices in order of preference. Families can, of course, choose the nearby school to which the child would have been automatically assigned before neighborhood schools were abolished. The preferences are then collected by the district assignment officer, who periodically assigns students to schools. The first registration cycle ends January 31 and usually draws about 500 applicants. The second and third cycles end on March 31 and May 31 respectively, and subsequent placements are made individually.

Placements have been made with racial balance in mind, and the proportion of students from any racial group must be within 10 percent of that group's representation in the district as a whole. Once a school's enrollment reaches this proportion, no more students from that group will be admitted. In addition to parental preferences, other priorities include siblings and students who live within walking distance of the school.

In the event that there are still too many applicants from any racial group for a particular school or program, a lottery is held for the available places. Students who are not accommodated with one of their first three choices are assigned to another school where there are seats available consistent with diversity requirements; they are automatically put on a waiting list for the next suitable vacancy in one of their preferred schools. School officials also contact parents by telephone and give them the names of other schools where seats are available. Hardship appeals are considered if parents can show that the child has "extraordinary educational needs that cannot be met at the assigned school" or that attending the assigned school will "subject the child to an unsafe learning environment." Parents who accept an initial assignment but become dissatisfied have the right to request a transfer to other schools.

To help parents make their selections, each school hires a part-time parent liaison to meet with prospective families, give tours, and answer questions. They function as a conduit of information about the schools to the families of the students. The district also operates a Family Resource Center that disseminates information on all fifteen schools as well as the ins and outs of the overall system and coordinates some of the work of each school's parent liaison. No parent can register for elementary school unless they visit the official information center. A major task for Lenore Preusser, who runs the Family Resource Center, is to educate parents, especially poor families and recent immigrants, who might not otherwise be aware of their rights.

While the recent decision by the school committee to use socioeconomic status rather than race as the primary basis for promoting diversity will not alter these procedures in any significant ways, it will have an impact on where some students enroll. Starting with pupils entering kindergarten in September 2002, students will be assigned in such a way that the proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch will be within fifteen points of the overall percentage of such students in the district, which is now 48 percent. The

allowable deviation will drop to ten points in September 2003, and to five points in September 2004. Race will become a factor in assignment only if the racial mix of a school dips below a certain level.

Each November the district conducts three kindergarten information sessions, where parents can hear presentations on the programs and philosophy of each school. School fairs are held throughout the city, and each school operates a booth. Preusser canvasses local day-care centers and sends personal letters to parents of Head Start children. The center holds dozens of community meetings and advertises them on the radio and in foreign-language newspapers. Staff members follow up by calling parents who are known to have school-age children but fail to register. Flyers are distributed in laundries and supermarkets, and a twenty-four-hour telephone recording carries information on how to enroll. Each school is required to create its own pamphlet offering information about their respective resources, and the Cambridge public school system publishes a brochure entitled "Cambridge Schools at a Glance," with brief descriptions and contact information for all schools and programs.

## Evolution of Controlled Choice in Cambridge

Over the years the procedures for administering controlled choice were modified in two significant respects.

First, in 1989 the school committee liberalized the definition of "walk zone" to allow more students to qualify for priority on the basis of proximity to the schools. The practical effect was to expand, at least on a partial basis, the traditional concept of neighborhood schools and thereby to put some constraints on the availability of all schools to all students.

Second, the extent to which enrollment of students from a particular group may deviate from the districtwide average has varied. Originally, a school was considered desegregated if its racial balance of students of color and white students fell within five percentage points, plus or minus, of the racial balance of the district as a whole. Over the years, the allowable disparity was gradually expanded to 10 percent, and in 1997, a new racial desegregation policy was instituted that required schools to be within ten points in each of three, rather than two, categories: (a) white, (b) African American and Other Black, and (c) other students of color.

In 2000, the school committee undertook another comprehensive review of how the controlled choice plan was being implemented to determine whether any additional changes were necessary. This review led to the December 2001 switch from race to socioeconomic status as the primary basis for achieving diversity of enrollment.

## HOW PARENTS EXERCISE CHOICE

Since 1992 the district Office of Development and Assessment, headed by Barbara Black, has conducted an annual survey to examine the process of kindergarten registration. The surveys use questionnaires given to parents who come to register their child as well as open-ended interviews for those willing to take the time to engage in them.

### Proportion of Parents Getting One of Their First Three Choices

Over the years the overwhelming majority of applicants who apply during the first cycle are admitted to a preferred school, usually their first choice. Data for a recent cycle, which ended in January 2001, showed that there were 472 applicants for places in kindergarten. Of these, 86 percent received their first choice, and 91 percent received one of their first three choices.<sup>11</sup> The breakdown is as follows:

- u First choice—407 (86 percent)
- u Second choice—14 (3 percent)
- u Third choice—10 (2 percent)
- u Mandated assignments—41 (9 percent)

Of the 41 students receiving mandated assignments, 21 were eventually placed in one of their top three choices, 12 withdrew from the system, and 8 stayed in the school to which they were assigned. In practice, it seems that relatively few students ever end up studying in a school to which they receive a mandated assignment. In 1998–99 only 1 out of 31 students remained in the school to which they were

assigned. The comparable figures were none in 1999–2000 and 13 of 43 in 2000.<sup>12</sup>

Data from the January 2001 kindergarten registration process show that virtually all parents who did not receive their first choice of school were white. Seven of the 18 African Americans applying to Morse were denied admission, but otherwise, all of the 124 blacks participating in the process received their first choice. The other applicants who did not receive an assignment to their school of choice were whites applying to five schools: Peabody (10 of 35), King Open (11 of 31), Cambridgeport (5 of 21), Morse (7 of 20), and Graham and Parks (7 of 17). All whites applying to other schools received their preferred choice.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that so many parents receive one of their first choices suggests that a substantial number of parents are looking beyond their immediate neighborhoods. One of the things that controlled choice had going for it politically in Cambridge was the fact that by the 1980s the concept of the neighborhood school had already begun to erode. The young middle-class newcomers who had moved to Cambridge in the 1970s settled wherever they could find space in the city's tight housing market, and they shared none of their blue-collar neighbors' loyalty to neighborhood schools. Their eyes were quickly drawn to the Cambridge Alternative School and other schools that were innovative and drew students from throughout the district. Indeed, by 1979, about one-third of the system's white students were enrolled in schools outside of their neighborhood school attendance district.<sup>14</sup> Data for the last two years show that three out of five students now attend schools outside of what would otherwise be consider their home district.<sup>15</sup>

### What Parents Look for in a School

The 1998 kindergarten survey summarized parents' responses to the question of which factors were important to them in choosing a school and concluded that the appeal of neighborhood schools is still strong. The only criterion to receive an affirmative response from a majority of respondents was "close to home," a factor cited by 57 percent of parents. Other criteria cited by substantial numbers of parents were "good teachers" (48 percent), "teaching methods" (46 percent), and "sibling currently at school" (42 percent).

Five other factors were deemed less important: "good principal" (23 percent), "friends at the school" (18 percent), "good neighbor-

hood” (16 percent), “good test scores” (16 percent), and “good resources” (14 percent). Two others were deemed not important. These were “good size” (8 percent) and “school’s appearance” (5 percent).

## Popular and Unpopular Schools

The popularity of the fifteen schools in Cambridge varies considerably. The Family Resource Center’s Leonore Preusser stated in an interview that there are four schools that Cambridge parents “crave” and others that they “avoid,” and data from the annual kindergarten surveys back up this assertion. The four schools currently deemed most desirable are Cambridgeport, King Open, Morse, and Peabody. Those that parents seek to avoid, she said, are Fitzgerald, Harrington, Kennedy, and Tobin.

The 2000 kindergarten report notes that the popularity rankings of schools “bounce” somewhat from year to year. Agassiz, for example, dropped from first to sixth on the list of most popular schools between 1996 and 1999, while Cambridgeport has been moving up the ranking. Nevertheless, it concludes, “The overall pattern stays the same: the heavily selected schools for the most part remain on the top half and the undersampled schools remain on the bottom half” of the list ranking schools by popularity.<sup>16</sup>

## Varying Sophistication Among Parents

In addition to showing that the popularity of schools varies widely, Cambridge public school studies show that the sophistication of various groups of parents in approaching the decisionmaking system varies widely and, not surprisingly, so do the choices they make.

The 1999 kindergarten survey noted, “some groups of parents are consistently less involved in choosing a school for their children, while others are active and savvy about how to negotiate the process.” Parents who are low income and less well educated frequently “arrive at the registration site with paperwork unfinished and no real idea of which school they would like their child to attend.”<sup>17</sup> This conclusion was reinforced by Preusser when she commented in an interview with the author, “The first people in the door are usually high SES. They may come from all over the world but they know exactly which schools they

want—one, two three.” Over the years, the parents who waited until the second and third admissions cycles for application to kindergarten have tended to be less affluent and less well educated than those participating in the first cycle.

The 1998 kindergarten registration survey examined these issues in considerable detail and concluded that the manner in which parents go about choosing a school is “largely dependent on the educational level of the parents, as well as their membership in a linguistic or racial minority community.”<sup>18</sup> For example, the most active visitors to schools tended to be well-educated whites. “Parents with college or post-graduate education made up 63 percent of respondents to the questionnaire but accounted for 77 percent of those using visits,” it said. Less educated parents make use of information from their daycare center and advice from the Cambridge School Registration Center.

The report noted that the schools sought by middle-class families tend to have full touring schedules every week, while others host only a few parents a month. Moreover, it continued, most visitors have a preconceived notion of exactly what type of educational setting they want for their child and then embark on a search process to find it. “The process of selecting schools to visit is therefore not one of discovery,” the study found. “It is rather one of finding a school which comes closest to the personal vision of the parent.” It added, “well-educated parents were best able to articulate features of the educational environment which they wanted for their child.”

The 1998 survey also determined that the information-gathering process is dominated by “word-of-mouth networks” among friends and neighbors who share personal experiences and individual perceptions regarding particular schools, teachers, and styles of teaching. Such networks, Black wrote, “exist in each socio-economic, racial and linguistic community and are largely outside the reach of official structures.”

The fact that more privileged groups of parents have learned to work the system more effectively than less advantaged ones has led to the frequently articulated charge that controlled choice is an elitist system. “There is an element in Cambridge that views choice as a tool of the wealthy, something that helps them achieve their purposes at the expense of other, less savvy consumers,” observed Nancy Walser, a member of the school committee, in an interview. A recent article in the *Cambridge Chronicle* stated, “in general, minority and low-income residents, whose children are lagging behind in school achievement, are opposed to choice.”<sup>19</sup>

## Informal Segregation of Schools

The 1998 kindergarten survey suggested that there is a causal link between the way different groups of parents approach the decision-making process and the existence of overchosen and underchosen schools. “Testable discrepancies between schools arise as certain socio-economic groups gravitate to some schools and not others, based on the informal evaluations of their friends and family and their own perceptions,” wrote Black. “Performance then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the status quo is maintained.”

The report stated that “the preferred educational setting among educated Cambridge residents appears to be the developmental classroom.” By contrast, lower income and less well-educated parents are more likely to settle for their neighborhood school. As the 2000 survey put it, “Opting for the neighborhood school is common in all groups, but it has more of an effect on the lower-income and less-educated, who tend to live in the neighborhoods where the less popular schools are located.”

The 1998 survey characterized this pattern as “informal segregation” of schools in Cambridge. Every year, Black wrote, there is “a small cluster of schools which are over-visited and over-requested by the most educated parents throughout Cambridge, who are arguably the most savvy about education as a pursuit in itself, and promote this attitude in their children. These schools are thus the ones which also have the highest standardized test scores, the most active parent body, and are in the most affluent neighborhoods.” Such clustering of parental choices, the report says, “defies the best efforts of the Cambridge Public Schools to guarantee equity across all of the schools, and bolster the appeal of each school, thereby ‘leveling the playing field.’”

Cambridge public school data on the relative popularity of the fifteen schools show substantial differences in preference patterns among different groups of parents. The most popular school, Morse, attracts both white and black families and is the first choice among blacks. However, data from the January 2001 kindergarten survey show that other than Morse and Agassiz, there are no schools favored by both groups. Large numbers of blacks apply to Fletcher-Maynard, Tobin, Graham and Parks, and Fitzgerald, while substantial numbers of whites apply to Peabody, King Open, and Cambridgeport. Whereas 17 percent of all whites apply to Peabody, for example, only 5 percent of blacks do.

Similar patterns emerge when applicants are grouped by income. Data from the 1999 kindergarten report, which is based on information voluntarily supplied by parents who are registering their children, show that roughly two-thirds of applicants to Cambridgeport, King Open, and Peabody had family incomes of more than \$50,000, while three schools had no applicants in this income category, and three others had no more than five.

Black's office has made a series of recommendations aimed at improving recruiting procedures in order to level the playing field in the school selection process. These have included publication of a comprehensive and user-friendly guide to the various schools, strengthened outreach to less involved and minority and immigrant populations, and targeting families with three-year-old children in order to extend the timeframe for reaching and motivating such families. Other efforts to combat the informal segregation include the merging with strong community involvement of Fletcher and Maynard, the revitalization of Harrington under the leadership of a Portuguese-speaking principal, turning the Amigos program into a full-fledged school, and revitalizing Fitzgerald through renovation of its facilities and the installation of a new principal.

### **THE IMPACT OF CONTROLLED CHOICE IN CAMBRIDGE OVERALL ENROLLMENT**

One immediate effect of the introduction of choice in the early 1980s was that it brought some students back into the public school system. The situation since then is less clear. According to current U.S. Census data, 85 percent of children living in Cambridge attend public schools, a figure that has remained more or less constant in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Critics, however, say that such figures do not take account of many students, including homeschoolers and students who attend out-of-state schools, and they put the proportion of children served by the public school system somewhat lower.

### **Enhanced Diversity of Educational Programs**

The Cambridge public school system has traditionally prided itself on the diversity of its educational offerings, and the introduction of school choice led to a proliferation of educational options. From the

beginning, planners recognized that controlled choice makes no sense unless students and parents have legitimate options from which to make their selection.

As already noted, the Cambridge Alternative Public School opened in 1972 to serve families seeking an open learning environment. King Open followed three years later to serve a similar constituency. In her guidebook to Cambridge schools, Nancy Walser writes, “what began as a trickle soon became a wave.”<sup>21</sup> As enrollments grew, Cambridge added a series of schools-within-schools, starting with the high-tech School of the Future, housed in Tobin, in 1983, and the Amigos two-way Spanish–English bilingual program in 1985. Cambridgeport was established in 1990 in response to lobbying by parents who could not get their children into the Graham and Parks developmental program. It has since become one of the most popular schools in its own right. The fact that the state was providing substantial capital funding as an incentive for voluntary desegregation facilitated the setting up of new programs, and by 1998, parents could choose between twenty-three programs in fifteen schools.

Cambridge has also extended the principle of diversity to its sole high school, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. The regular school was divided in 2000 into five smaller schools, each with its own staff and academic style but balanced by academic ability, race, and socioeconomic status.

## Racial Balance

There is a general sense among Cambridge residents that controlled choice has succeeded in its primary objective of fostering racial diversity in Cambridge schools. Most agree that although inequities persist, the plan has had a strong positive impact on the culture of the school system by promoting the respect for diversity on which the city prides itself. As Denise Simmons, an African-American member of the school committee who recently moved on to the City Council, commented in an interview, “Controlled choice has gotten children of different ethnic and racial groups together who wouldn’t otherwise be together.”

Enrollment data for the 2000–01 school year show that whites account for 40 percent of students enrolled in public elementary schools and that the proportion of whites in individual schools ranges between 24

and 50 percent (see Table 1). As far as whites are concerned, only two schools, King and the new Fletcher Maynard Academy, fall outside the current guideline that schools be within ten percentage points of the districtwide average of 40 percent. Cambridgeport, where half of students are white, is the only school where any single racial or ethnic group accounts for half of enrollment. It should be noted, however, that if the previous guideline of five percentage points were still in effect, only four of the fifteen schools would be in compliance. In an interview, Michael Alves observed that when controlled choice was first introduced in 1981, few, if any, schools would have been considered desegregated.

Cambridge schools also currently conform to the 10 percent guideline with respect to Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Other Black students. In each case, at least twelve of the fifteen elementary schools are in compliance.

Charles Willie, who has carried out the most systematic analysis of racial balance in Cambridge schools, commented in an interview that Cambridge has no “racially isolated” schools, which he defined as schools in which 80 percent of students are of a single racial or ethnic background. “Controlled choice did help the racial balance of Cambridge schools,” he said. Gary Orfield seconded Willie’s assessment and suggested that the racial balance of Cambridge schools has important educational and other consequences. “One of the conditions of getting a good job in a multi-racial setting is being able to work with members of other groups,” he said in an interview. “The numbers in Cambridge are higher than in any other city.”

Willie has not always been so positive in his analysis. In his 1997 report to the school committee, using the five percentage points standard in effect at the time, he observed that “a majority of Cambridge’s elementary schools were imbalanced racially” during the 1990s and that during the 1995–96 school year only six of the fifteen elementary schools operating at that time met the school district’s standard.<sup>22</sup> He concluded that the “lofty goal” of making all schools equally available to all students “has the appearance of being compromised over the years.” It should be noted that at that time, all but one school, Cambridgeport, would have been considered in conformity by the current standard of 10 percent.<sup>23</sup>

One factor in the racial imbalance, Willie suggested, has to do with the location of bilingual programs, which are for the most part located in schools with high proportions of minority students and add to the proportion of minorities in those schools. “It would appear that the location of bilingual education programs is one factor that contributes to racial

imbalance in some Cambridge schools,” he wrote in the 1997 report. On the other hand, the two-way Amigos bilingual program is well balanced both racially and socioeconomically.

In his 1997 report, Willie also discussed significant links between race and parental preference based on an analysis of which schools were the most popular among parents. Noting that “six of the seven schools in the top half of the distribution of first-choice schools had substantial proportions of Whites in their student bodies,” Willie concludes that “the racial composition of a student body seems to be an influential factor in determining whether some schools are chosen by students as their first choice.” Such a conclusion is consistent with the patterns of racial preference discussed previously.

Willie went on to observe that “there is something grossly unequal” about a school system where choice is so polarized. The task confronting a public school system that advocates equity, Willie writes, “is to discover educational ways of making all schools in the system attractive so that the racial composition of a school’s student body will have a diminishing effect on students’ choices.”

Current data provides mixed signals on this observation. In three of the four schools currently deemed most desirable—Cambridgeport, King Open, and Peabody—the proportion of whites is 46 percent or higher. On the other hand, three of the four least popular schools—Fitzgerald, Harrington, and Tobin—also have at least 43 percent white enrollment, which surpasses the districtwide average of 40 percent (see Table 1).

Some persons look at the racial balance data and see the glass as half empty. “Choice has been a failure,” said Joe Grassi, a member of the school committee in an interview. “By allowing each school to do what it wanted, we have evolved into two school systems, and we have not just segregation but self-segregation.” One important factor, he said, is that “underchosen schools got the special education and bilingual because they had the space.”

School officials point out that a certain amount of erosion of racial balance over time is inevitable. Even if the entering kindergarten class is racially balanced, the racial mix will be altered by students who leave for schools on their waitlist or by children who transfer into the school during the year. Mid-year placements disproportionately involve immigrants and other low-income and nonwhite students, and such children are placed in underchosen schools because they are the ones that have openings. School officials argue, however, that the effect of these factors is insufficient to have a significant bearing on racial balance in most years.

## Socioeconomic Balance

While controlled choice generally succeeded in bringing about racial diversity in Cambridge schools, it did little to promote socioeconomic diversity.

School officials in Cambridge use the proportion of students in a school who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch under federal guidelines as their standard for defining high and low socioeconomic status. As seen in Figure 1, data for the 2000–01 academic year show that the elementary school population is almost equally divided by socioeconomic status—48 percent of students eligible for subsidized lunch and 52 percent required to pay.

The distribution of high- and low-socioeconomic status students among the fifteen schools, however, is far from equal. The proportions of low-socioeconomic status students in particular schools vary from 19 percent at Cambridgeport to 79 percent at King. If the racial target of having establishing a mix of students in every school that was within ten percentage points of the districtwide average were applied to socioeconomic status, only three schools—Longfellow, Morse, and Tobin—would be in compliance. In terms of numbers, well over half of the low-socioeconomic status students are concentrated in just five of the fifteen schools: Harrington, Kennedy, King, Longfellow, and Tobin.

Parental choices also seem to be influenced by the socioeconomic mix of students in schools. Three of the four schools currently deemed the most desirable—Cambridgeport, King Open, and Peabody—are those that have the lowest proportion of students eligible for subsidized lunch, while three of the four least popular schools—Fitzgerald, Harrington, and Kennedy—are among those with the highest proportion of such students (see Table 1).

The obvious question of the extent to which race and socioeconomic status overlap will be discussed later.

## Student Achievement

As already noted, a central tenet of controlled choice is that parental preferences will be used to guide school improvement efforts. Central authorities are supposed to intervene in underchosen schools in order to enhance their quality and thus make them more attractive. Over time, the theory holds, continuous efforts to build up the least popular schools

will not only expand the range of attractive schools but also raise the overall quality of the system.

In Cambridge it appears that race-based controlled choice has *not* had the positive impact on overall student achievement envisioned by its architects. One can make the case that the district as a whole does relatively well, at least in comparison to similar districts in Massachusetts and elsewhere. For example, data from the Massachusetts Department of Education show that 46 percent of Cambridge eighth graders obtained a passing score on the history and social science section of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests administered in the spring of 2001. This figure compares unfavorably with the 59 percent passing rate for the state as a whole, but school officials note that a relatively high proportion of Cambridge eighth graders qualify for subsidized lunch—41 percent versus 22 percent for the state as a whole. Data on the reading section of the California Achievement Test show that Cambridge eighth graders perform just slightly above the national norm and that the mean normal curve equivalent rose from 51.0 in 1992 to 54.2 in 1998, the last year that this particular test was administered in Cambridge.<sup>24</sup>

As in other urban school systems, student achievement as measured by standardized test scores remains highly polarized and is strongly associated both with the race and ethnicity of students and with their socioeconomic background. Average test scores vary widely among the fifteen primary schools, and, as already noted, the system is widely viewed as divided between “good” and “bad” schools. “Racial integration had huge positive impact in Cambridge,” said Gary Orfield in an interview. “It has had a big effect on people’s lives, where they live, whether they go to college, and students who go to integrated schools will be more likely to have integrated lives. But integration has not done much to improve student achievement.”

In keeping with national trends, the issue of academic quality has become definitive in school policy debates in Cambridge. The standards-based reform movement has focused national attention on the student achievement, and in keeping with prevailing winds, three years ago the state of Massachusetts instituted the MCAS. The tests are administered in grades 3, 4, 8, and 12, and high school students must pass math and language arts sections in order to graduate.

Cambridge did not fare well in the initial administration of the tests, in part because many students boycotted the first two administrations of the tests on the ground that they do not provide an accurate

snapshot of public education in Cambridge. The boycotts were less extensive in the 2001–02 school year, apparently because many high school students began to consider the possibility that not passing the two tests could endanger their high school diplomas.

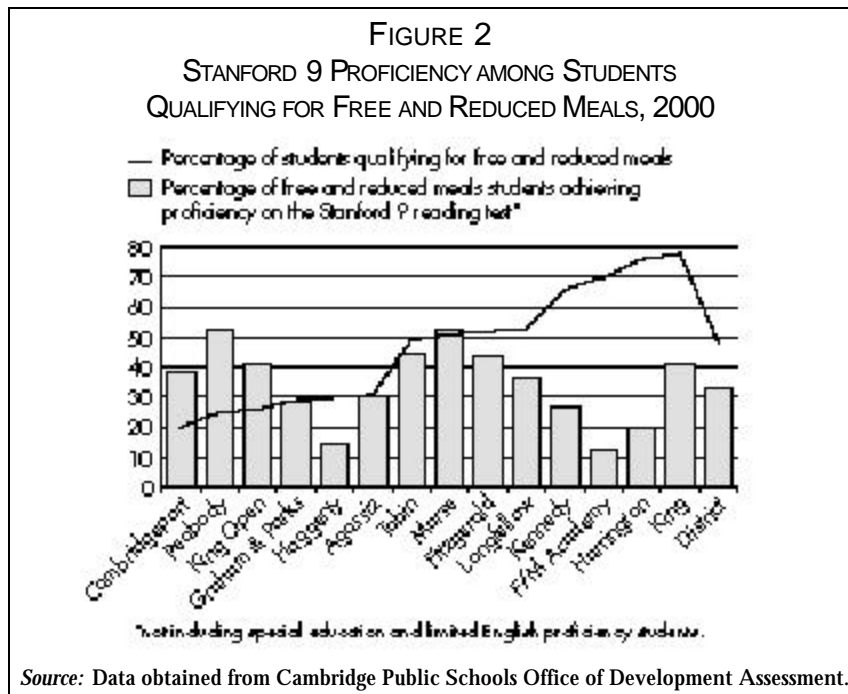
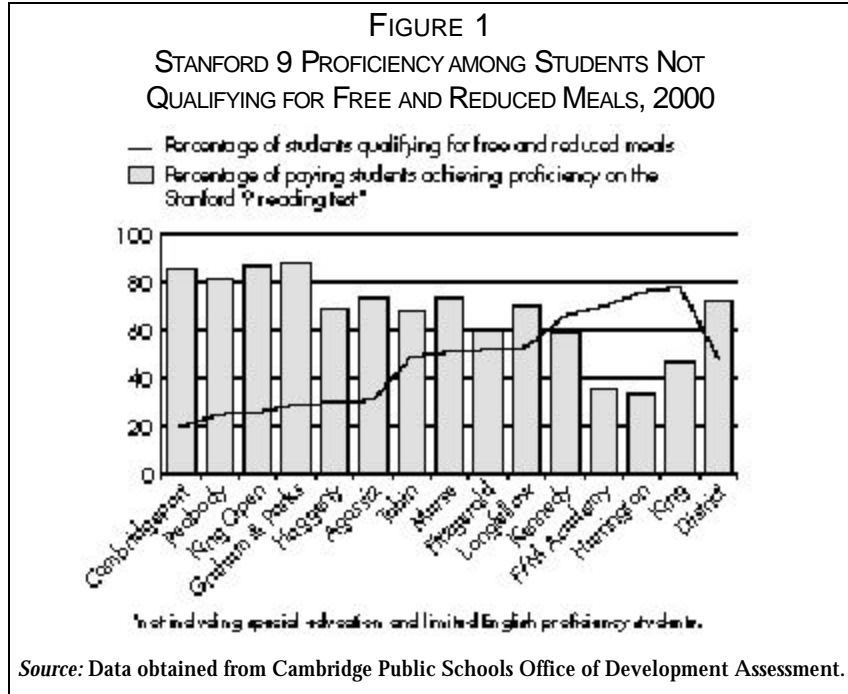
The results of this year's test showed considerable improvement, both at the high school and in elementary schools, although the district as a whole still lags behind statewide averages. Mayor Anthony Galluccio, who is chairman of the school committee, attributed the gains to efforts by CPS to address achievement issues. "While we don't all agree with the complete validity of this test, we see systematically schools have made an effort to align their curriculums with the frameworks, and we are seeing the results," he commented. "In a system that has always fostered creativity and individuality, I think you're beginning to see the balance."<sup>25</sup>

More troubling than the overall performance of the school system are the achievement disparities between high-performing and low-performing schools and groups of students. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the wide disparities among schools in the number of students in grades 3 through 8 who achieved proficiency on the Stanford 9 reading test in 2000, especially among students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

Significant disparities can also be observed among different groups of students. Results of the 2000 Stanford reading test for students in grades 3 through 8 show that 67 percent of whites and 63 percent of Asians achieved proficiency, but only 28 percent of African Americans, 25 percent of Hispanics, and 21 percent of Other Blacks did so. Results of the 2000 MCAS reading test show a similar pattern. Among eighth graders, 59 percent of Asians and 53 percent of whites achieved proficiency, compared with only 27 percent of African Americans, 28 percent of Hispanics, and 29 percent of Other Blacks.<sup>26</sup> The Cambridge public school system is under intense pressure both from the state of Massachusetts and internal critics, especially members of minority groups, to narrow such achievement gaps among schools and between various groups of students. The state specifically called the district to task for achievement levels at Kennedy.

## Confronting the Achievement Gap

An important policy question, of course, is why controlled choice in Cambridge did not function in accordance with the underlying theory,



which calls for consistent intervention to improve underchosen schools. “The rank ordering of schools of choice is a referendum on the attractiveness of all schools,” said Charles Willie. “Those schools that are least preferred are alerted that they must develop plans to make themselves attractive to students. This process encourages the system to be continuously improving least-attractive schools.” Michael Alves described Cambridge’s controlled choice as a “living reform” in which the system is, in effect, “re-created” every year. “Educational improvement becomes an explicit concern, and improvements are self-generated,” he says. “The recurring question becomes: What do you do with schools that people do not want?”

Bobbie D’Alessandro, the superintendent, argues that over the last five years she has made educational improvement a priority by emphasizing reading in all schools and investing heavily in reduced class sizes and more aides in classrooms. “In 1997 our kids were not reading at grade level, so for the last four years we have focused on reading,” she said in an interview. “Before, our curriculum was not aligned with the state curriculum, and now it is almost aligned. Our goal is to have a basic core that the state says is important enough to graduate but also honor the differentiation that makes us unique.”

D’Alessandro has reversed the proliferation of separate programs that characterized the early history of controlled choice. Four Follow Through programs designed for Head Start graduates were merged with their host schools, the School of the Future became part of Tobin, and a Spanish bilingual program at Longfellow was abandoned. Two years ago, D’Alessandro merged two struggling schools, Fletcher and Maynard, into the new Fletcher Maynard Academy under a forceful new principal, and heavy investments are now being made in Fitzgerald, including renovated facilities. In the fall of 2001 the Amigos program at Kennedy became a separate school within the same building.

With the student population declining, D’Alessandro has made it clear that she is prepared to authorize at least one more merger of schools that fail to get their acts together. She also noted that she is currently carrying out a survey of kindergarten parents to determine what sort of schools they seek, and once the results are in, she is prepared to find a way to satisfy their wishes. Options under consideration include an arts school, an international school, and a science and technology school. Critics, however, question the seriousness of D’Alessandro’s commitment to improving low performing schools.

Whatever one's assessment of D'Allessandro's commitment to turning around low performing schools, one must ask why the central administration did not take such actions during the 1980s and early 1990s. D'Allessandro understandably declined to speculate on the motives of her predecessors, but several school committee members had an explanation. They argue that rather than take on the difficult challenge of closing, reorganizing, or otherwise investing in failing schools, the Cambridge public school system has adopted what Alice Turkel of the school committee called an "additive" approach that focused on establishing new schools to meet the needs of parents whose child was not admitted into a preferred school. This policy, which led to the proliferation of specialized programs, served to defuse middle-class disenchantment with the educational options available to them, but it did nothing to address the problems of failing schools.

The additive approach was reversed in the 1990s when the number of options available to parents was reduced from twenty-three programs in fifteen schools to the same number of schools and four bilingual programs. The change was portrayed by school officials as an effort to make the most effective use of resources in a declining student market and to promote a more equitable distribution of students.

This trend appears to reflect an insight that Charles Willie pointed out in his 1997 report to the CPS, namely the attraction to parents of schools that operate focused schoolwide programs rather than what he called "attractor" programs aimed at niche markets. "Schools in Cambridge that are most attractive in terms of educational offerings are those with a dedicated focus rather than those that included several different academic programs," he wrote. "Thus, we believe that more schools should be encouraged to develop a dedicated focus, since the attractiveness of special programs is diminishing."<sup>27</sup> This process also works the other way around, of course, since schools that are popular have the luxury of being able to fine tune a particular educational focus rather than seeking multiple offerings as a way of attracting additional students.<sup>28</sup>

## RETHINKING THE RACIAL BASIS OF CONTROLLED CHOICE

In 2000, Cambridge public schools launched a major review of their controlled choice plan. The ostensible reason for the review was to determine whether additional changes were necessary beyond those already implemented in the mid-1990s, but three other forces were also at work.

First, as already noted, many Cambridge residents, including some members of the school committee, were becoming increasingly concerned about the achievement gap and other continuing inequities in the system. White middle-class parents wanted more developmental options for their children, while African-American and Latino parents were dissatisfied with the test scores in their children's schools.

Second, a number of state and federal court decisions had raised doubts about whether race was a permissible category to use in assigning students to schools. Legal counsel has advised the school committee that its race-based assignment policy would likely be struck down by the courts if a legal challenge were mounted against it. In 1998, the First Circuit Court of Appeals barred the use of racial preferences in admission in a case involving Boston Latin School, and in 1999 the public school system in Boston moved away from using race in its controlled choice program for such reasons.

Third, school officials have become increasingly aware of the extent to which schools are isolated socioeconomically and are coming to see this as a major obstacle to improving academic achievement among underperforming students.

In November 2001, the Cambridge public school system submitted a report to the school committee recommending the use of socioeconomic status rather than race as the primary means of achieving diversity. The report cited "the growing body of research that shows that high concentrations of students of poverty in a school may have a negative impact on achievement of students of poverty within that school."<sup>29</sup> Based on this review, the Cambridge public school system proposed—and the school committee subsequently adopted—a modified controlled choice plan with three notable features.

First, the plan calls for improved student recruiting policies aimed at enhancing parental understanding of the options available to them and helping all schools to recruit from throughout the district. The report suggested working with marketing experts to develop strategies at both the district and school levels, and it called for ongoing monitoring of recruitment strategies by the superintendent.

Second, the plan calls for the launching of a program improvement process to assist schools that are not meeting achievement goals set by the district or are not attracting diverse student enrollments. Under this process, the superintendent will use data on parental choices, surveys of parents, and other information to identify "educational programs that might be attractive to a greater number of parents/guardians." Underchosen schools will be invited to propose plans to improve their

educational offerings, including the possibility of merging with another school. The plan also charges the superintendent with reviewing each school's School Improvement Plan every spring in order to determine what changes or additional support might be in order.

It is not at all clear what powers the new plan will give the superintendent that she does not already have, and critics wonder why this component of the plan was not included in earlier drafts. "This is a practical opportunity to do what we should have been doing all along: improve the schools so that choice will work," said Nancy Walser in an interview. "Bobbie has not been using the power she has to remove principals. The problem is that underperforming schools have champions, including local politicians and veteran teachers."

Third, and most important, the plan mandates a shift from race to socioeconomic status as the primary criterion for achieving enrollment diversity in Cambridge schools. The basic argument is that such a change will not only preserve diversity in the schools in a legally defensible manner but also enhance overall student achievement.

Lest the plan be interpreted as a subterfuge for continuing the current race-based assignment policy, school officials are careful not to discuss race. There is no definitive data available on how a shift to socioeconomic status would affect racial diversity, but Cambridge public school data showing the correlation of Free and Reduced Meals Students (FARMS) with race and ethnicity provide some indications. Slightly less than half (48 percent) of all students qualify for subsidized lunch, but the proportions vary widely among different groups of students. Only about a quarter (27 percent) of white students qualify for subsidized lunch, compared with 62 percent of African-American, 81 percent of Other Black, and 69 percent of Hispanic students.<sup>30</sup>

One striking feature of the new approach to controlled choice is that it offers an *educational* justification for every major policy recommendation. Continued precedence for siblings, for example, is justified on the ground that "many parents/guardians believe that assigning siblings to the same school allows them to be more involved in their children's education." School officials also build an elaborate case that a socioeconomic status-based diversity policy will address the twin problems of underachieving schools and achievement gaps between various groups of students. The core argument is that, under the right conditions, the creation of socioeconomically diverse schools can enhance the performance of poor students while not adversely affecting that of middle-class students.

## The Relation of Socioeconomic Status and Achievement

Ever since the Coleman Report of 1966, educators and policymakers have understood that there is a strong association between student achievement and socioeconomic status. On average, students from wealthy homes perform much better than low-income peers on standardized tests and other measures of academic success. Strong associations also exist between student achievement and racial and ethnic background.

The experience of Cambridge is consistent with these general patterns. Data from the 2000 administration of the Stanford 9 reading test to students in grades 3 through 8 also show a strong association between the socioeconomic status mix in a school and the proportion of that school's students achieving proficiency. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, schools with high proportions of low-income students tend to have relatively low test scores. Five of the six highest scoring schools have 31 percent or less subsidized lunch students, while four of the five lowest scoring schools have 66 percent or more subsidized.

In his 1997 report to the Cambridge public school system, Charles Willie examined data on the California Achievement Test and concluded, "While both race and socioeconomic status are associated with academic achievement in school, socioeconomic status appears to have a stronger association than race in Cambridge public schools."<sup>31</sup> He also reported that his research in Charleston County, South Carolina, during the 1990s "revealed that differences in achievement scores between white and black children were lower in racially-mixed or socioeconomically-mixed schools than in schools that were racially- or socioeconomically-homogeneous."

As part of the review of controlled choice, the Office of Development and Assessment analyzed the current research literature on the relation of socioeconomic status and achievement, including that of Charles Willie, Gary Orfield, and Richard D. Kahlenberg, whose recent book *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice*, makes the case for using socioeconomic integration as a means of improving student achievement.

These researchers noted that Coleman found not only that an individual's academic achievement is related to family income but also that individual achievement is related to the socioeconomic status of classmates in a school. Middle-class pupils have, on average, higher expectations and aspirations, which can have a positive peer effect on all children in middle-class schools. Middle-class parents are, on average,

more active in schools, more likely to volunteer in class and to attend PTA meetings, and to make financial contributions to the school—actions that redound to the benefit of all students in a school. High quality teachers are attracted to these middle-class schools where they can spend more time teaching and less time disciplining students. This group of researchers believes that by providing more economically mixed schools with a core group of middle-class students and parents, school officials can eliminate the negative effect of concentrated poverty on poor students without reducing the achievement of middle-class children.

While not disputing the strong overall association between student achievement and socioeconomic status on the one hand and race and ethnicity on the other, Cambridge school officials find some interesting patterns among the various schools.

Figure 1 shows that paying middle-class students performed at levels above the district average in five of the six schools with the lowest proportion of FARMS students and just below the district average in the sixth school. Middle-class students performed at or just below the district average in the four schools with modest proportions of FARMS students, and they performed poorly at the four schools with the highest proportions of paying students. Based on this data, Barbara Black concluded in an interview: “Middle class kids do best in schools with relatively few FARMS students, and they do less well in schools with lots of poor kids.”

Figure 2 gives the parallel picture for low-income students. It shows that low-income students score above the district average in only three of the six schools with relatively few paying students and in only one of the four schools with a high proportion of paying students.<sup>32</sup> The striking pattern on this figure is that low-income students score above the district average in all four of the schools that have a relatively even balance of paying and nonpaying students. “It seems that schools with a good balance between paying and non-paying kids do a good job with poor students,” said Black. “Poor students do worst in schools where they constitute the majority.”

Taking the two figures together, Black drew the conclusion that “schools with a balanced mix of FARMS and non-paying students do the best job with poor kids while at the same time serving middle class kids at a relatively high level.”

The Cambridge public school proposal used such reasoning in proposing the change to socioeconomic status as the basis for achieving diversity. “Based on the research that was reviewed on the impact of poverty on achievement,” the report states, “the CPS has determined that it will use

socioeconomic status, as measured by a student's eligibility for free and reduced meals, as a factor in assigning students to schools." The goal, it goes on to say, is for "each grade in each school" to be within a range of plus or minus fifteen percentage points of the districtwide average during the 2002–03 school year. The plan also calls for reducing the permissible range to 10 percent in 2003–04 and to 5 percent in 2004–05.<sup>33</sup> As of January 2001, 48 percent of Cambridge students were eligible for subsidized lunch, and 52 percent were not. Thus, the allowable range for each school next year will be a student body in which 33 to 63 percent of students would qualify for subsidized lunch and 37 to 67 percent would be required to pay (see Figure 1).

Based on his studies in Cambridge and elsewhere, Willie had made a similar policy recommendation. "A discovery that White students tend to have high achievement scores in multicultural settings (although not as high as in racially isolated White settings) and that Black students tend to have higher achievement scores in multicultural schools than in racially isolated black settings provides the basis for recommending more schools with mixed student bodies," he wrote. "'Mixed' schools benefit the entire system by helping blacks and other people of color but not substantially harming whites, since an overwhelming majority of Whites in urban school districts are already enrolled in these kinds of schools and are performing well."<sup>34</sup>

## Race, Gender, and Special Education

Regarding race, the new policy states that the Cambridge public school system "believes that it is important to have the option to use race or ethnicity as one of the diversity factors in order to avoid the harms of racial/ethnic isolation and to provide students the benefits of learning from students who are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds." On this point, the plan cites a recent and not yet published study by Dr. Gary Orfield showing that students in Cambridge benefit from having the opportunity to attend school with students with different backgrounds, adding that "Dr. Orfield's research is consistent with similar research that he has done in other school districts in the United States."<sup>35</sup>

The plan is careful to state that in using race or ethnicity as one of the diversity factors, the Cambridge public school system must do so "in a narrowly tailored manner as one of the diversity factors." It states that the public school system "will determine, after using the other race neutral factors, whether the applicant pool at a grade at a school is within a range

of plus or minus 15 percentage points of the district-wide kindergarten through grade 8 percentage” of the three categories of whites, African American and Other Blacks, and other students of color.

Like the current plan, the policy scheduled to go into effect in 2002 gives priority to children with siblings in the chosen school and to those who live in its immediate vicinity, “to the extent that the assignment does not negatively affect the diversity at the school being requested.” The plan acknowledges that gender, English language ability, and special education status can also be viewed as diversity factors that have educational benefits. It says that such factors will not be used in the assignment process but that the district will monitor each of these factors to determine whether any of them should be incorporated into the student assignment process in the future. Like the current plan, the new policy permits appeals if parents believe that the assignment constitutes a hardship for their child because of an “unsafe learning environment” or “extraordinary educational needs.”<sup>36</sup>

## Overlap of Race and Socioeconomic Status

One obvious question that arises is the extent to which race overlaps with socioeconomic status in Cambridge schools. The answer bears on the issue of whether moving to a socioeconomic status-based pupil assignment policy would, among other things, preserve the gains that have been made during the last two decades in promoting racial diversity.

Willie examined this issue in his 1997 report to the school committee. Using the criterion of a five percentage point deviation from the district average that was in effect at the time, he noted that four of the six Cambridge schools in which the proportions of low-socioeconomic status students exceeded the district average also had high proportions of students of color, while three of the seven schools in which the proportions of high-socioeconomic status students exceeded the district average had relatively small proportions of students of color. “Thus, the association between race and socioeconomic status is clearly seen at the upper and lower ends of the distributions of these variables in Cambridge public schools,” he wrote, adding that “there appears to be a larger overlap between these two variables at the lower end than at the upper end of the socioeconomic hierarchy.”

In his recommendations to the school committee, Willie supported the use of socioeconomic status rather than race as a basis for assigning

students to schools in an equitable fashion because of the substantial overlap in the two factors, but cautioned that the correlation is not perfect. On the basis of a regression, he concluded, “While about two-fifths of the variance in one characteristic may be attributed to the other,” he said, “three-fifths of the variance may be due to other sources and circumstances.” He suggested looking for “contextual influences,” such as learning environments that are well balanced racially or socio-economically.

Data from a July 2000 cross-tabulation of lunch status with race and ethnicity show substantial overlap. Two-thirds of blacks and Hispanics, but less than a quarter of whites, are on subsidized lunch. For Asians, the proportion is just over one-third. In numerical terms, blacks account for half of 2,557 subsidized (1,255), while Hispanics are one-fifth (542), whites one-fifth (527), and Asians are one-seventh (220).<sup>37</sup>

A look at school-by-school data for the 2000–01 school year also shows substantial overlap of race and socioeconomic status. All three of the schools where the proportion of students qualifying for subsidized lunch is more than twenty percentage points below the district average of 48 percent—Cambridgeport, King, and Peabody—are among those with the highest proportion of white students (at least 46 percent). Two of the three schools where the proportion of low-socioeconomic status students is at least twenty points above the district average—Kennedy, King, and New Academy—are those with the lowest proportion of white students (around 25 percent).<sup>38</sup>

The matter of the extent to which race and socioeconomic status overlap in Cambridge, however, is complicated. As already noted, the Amigos two-way bilingual program attracts students across the socioeconomic spectrum. Cambridge has a significant population of graduate students, including many Asians, at Harvard and MIT who have low incomes and, thus, whose children may qualify for subsidized lunch, but who would not be considered low-socioeconomic status by other criteria. Denise Simmons described the differences by saying, “There is fiscal poverty and educational poverty.”

## DEBATING THE SHIFT TO SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

The possibility of shifting from race to socioeconomic status as the primary criterion in achieving enrollment diversity has been discussed for more than a decade, and serious consideration was given to the idea in

the mid-1900s by then superintendent Mary Lou McGrath, who was concerned that schools with high proportions of poor children were not doing a good job of educating them. As a former second grade teacher at the upscale Peabody School, she understood the role that middle-class values played in fostering high achievement, and she had observed situations where having a diverse mix of students served to increase the achievement of low-income students while not pulling down that of wealthier ones. McGrath proposed shifting to a socioeconomic status-based diversity plan, but critics argued that it was condescending, and with McGrath due to retire soon, the plan died in committee.

Not surprisingly, most public debate of the CPS proposal focused on the likely impact of the switch from race to socioeconomic status as the primary basis for promoting diversity in Cambridge schools.

The most frequently cited reservation was that the shift to socioeconomic status would cause problems because fewer families would get one of their first choices of schools. Using the most recent kindergarten application data, Cambridge school officials ran computer simulations of what would have happened this year if socioeconomic status were used rather than race as the method of achieving diversity. The results showed that the number of mandatory assignments would nearly double, from 8 to 15 percent of families, or from forty to seventy students.<sup>39</sup> The impact would be particularly striking at a school such as Cambridgeport, where middle-class students currently outnumber low-income students by a ratio of four to one. As already noted, most of the parents of kindergartners who currently do not receive their first choices are middle-class whites seeking entrance to Peabody, King Open, Cambridgeport, Morse, and Agassiz. A shift to socioeconomic status as the basis of achieving diversity would certainly compound the problems of parents at these schools.

Some fear that such numbers will cause many frustrated families simply to pack up, literally as well as figuratively, and take their children out of the Cambridge public school system. "I have no doubt in my mind that the proposed change alone will not work to balance our schools on the basis of socioeconomic status," said one citizen, Maria Hanlon, in an op-ed article in the *Cambridge Chronicle*: "It will only drive middle-class families out of the system and further increase the percentage of poor children attending out schools."<sup>40</sup> A letter to the editor of the *Cambridge Chronicle* made the same point. "Let's face the facts," wrote Ellen Aronson. "Many dissatisfied families are leaving the

system. . . . This will further encourage many Cambridge families to look outside the public school system. This is so counterproductive. Cambridge needs families to stay and choose public school or it risks encouraging a two-tiered system.” She suggested a number of alternative steps, including balancing for gender and establishing a citywide preschool program.<sup>41</sup>

Others, however, dismissed such arguments. “If 20 families whose children will succeed under any circumstances want to pack up and leave over this issue, then let them go,” said Paul Toner, president of the Cambridge Teachers Association in an interview. “We can’t let a vocal minority of parents run the school system.” Toner, who until recently taught at Harrington, said that he supports the superintendent’s move to socioeconomic status because it is in line not only with his own classroom experience but also with research showing that poor students perform at a higher level in schools where they rub elbows with middle-class students. “We have been throwing resources after resources at schools with high proportions of poor kids, and they have had some positive effects,” he said. “But quality teaching and leadership can only go so far. We also need a more heterogeneous socioeconomic mix among the students.”

Cambridge mayor Anthony Galluccio strongly supported the shift to socioeconomic status as a means of improving achievement and suggested the “real agenda” for some opponents of the proposal is that “some middle class parents don’t want their kids in a school with a lot of poor kids.”<sup>42</sup>

Alice Turkel, a member of the school committee, said in an interview that while she generally favors the shift to socioeconomic status, she wants to tread carefully in raising the frustration level. “The devil is in the details,” she said. “It’s not just kindergarten assignments that will be affected but the wait lists for transfers in other grades. Until now parents have always had the sense that they would eventually get a school they wanted. The change to SES means that it will be virtually impossible for some families to get in some schools. We may have to look for some transition models.”

Some Cambridge residents and members of the school committee argued that the new policy does not go far enough. Joseph Grassi, a member of the school board, said that permitting a 10 percent deviation from districtwide averages in any school is too much. “It’s big on window dressing and small on substance,” he said. “It’s going to make small change and I support drastic change. We’ve created a system of

self-segregation that is really two different school systems. It's just unacceptable."<sup>43</sup> He added that he was not troubled if the plan caused some parents to leave the public school system.

Most Cambridge residents, though, seem to have accepted the idea that, although the overlap is not perfect, using family income as the primary means of achieving diversity also preserves the gains that have been made in racial integration. Gary Orfield warned in an interview, "It would be a serious mistake to think that race and class are the same. If you define class as income, you get people with high social capital and lots of middle class contacts but low income. If you focus on class, you won't get racial integration." Nevertheless, he took the position that "it is better to do class than to do nothing."

Orfield also raised two other concerns about a socioeconomic status-based policy. First, he wondered about the level of political support for desegregation based on class rather than race. "You don't hear a lot of people arguing that we need to understand poor people," he said. "Thus far plans like this have only been looked at by communities looking for a way to keep racial balance. Suburban districts have always resisted the idea."

Second, Orfield worries about the lack of a legal basis for overcoming socioeconomic disparities in schools. "Unlike race, it is legal to discriminate by class," he said. "There is nothing to protect such a policy in the long run. It would be better to have it out of politics." Willie also pointed out in an interview that "if you abandon race, the state of Massachusetts has no obligation to give you money." Others argue, however, that, given the Boston Latin case, the voluntary use of socioeconomic status now has significant legal advantages over using race in student assignment.

### **The Most Fundamental Concern: Student Achievement**

Running through all of the debate over the best way to assign students to schools has been the matter of academic achievement. There is near unanimity among Cambridge residents of the need not only to improve the quality of teaching and learning but also to narrow the substantial achievement differentials between high- and low-performing schools (see Figures 1 and 2). Debate over the superintendent's proposed change in pupil assignment policy was shaped by this need.

Basic to any system of choice is the existence of reasonable choices. “Unless you have something to offer at every school, it’s not going to work,” said Mary McDavitt, who has two children in the high school. “Shouldn’t we strive for excellence in all our schools? Shouldn’t we say, ‘It doesn’t really matter what school you go to?’”<sup>44</sup>

One set of policy questions revolved around why race-based controlled choice failed to increase student achievement in low-performing schools and how this can be repaired. Some put the blame on a general lack of academic standards. “We are a school system without standards,” said Grassi. “Every school does its own thing. We don’t have a school system; we have a system of schools.”

Others, however, blamed the additive approach. “When we first went to controlled choice the implied assumption was that the system would get you off the waiting list,” commented Nancy Walser in an interview.

When the list got long, the superintendent would create a school to satisfy parents on the list. That’s how my daughter Alice got involved in Cambridgeport. The same thing happened with King Open, and both of these are now among the strongest schools. In the process of adding these new programs, though, we left behind the schools that the middle class rejected even back then. Now is a perfect opportunity to do what should have done all along: improve schools so that choice will work.

Willie makes a similar assessment. “Controlled choice has failed because central districts did not intervene to help loser schools,” he said in an interview.

For choice to work, the central policy making group has to be concerned with the least performing schools. In the case of a school like King Open, it is the parents who should get the credit, not the district. And they created a school that only the affluent will go to. Working class parents want more structure. Over-subscribed schools are better than they have been before, and the overall quality of education has increased—but in selected places!

As already noted, some members of the school committee doubt how committed D’Alessandro is to raising academic quality. They point out that school improvement was not a part of earlier drafts of the plan and contend that it has been beefed up only because of pressure from

the school committee. Walser suggested that “the middle class feels that it is being used to do the dirty work of an administration that won’t throw out the bad teachers and principals” and said that any new plan needs “an intervention trigger.” “I’m trying to think about what would make this automatic,” she said in an interview.

Another set of questions dealt with the likelihood that a socio-economic status-based system would be able to do what the predecessor system did not. D’Alessandro and her staff cite research showing that poor students perform better when they are in schools with middle-class students, as well as data from Cambridge showing that socioeconomically balanced schools like Morse serve both middle-class and poor students well. “All the research shows that if you have isolated groups, you have problems,” she said in an interview. “If you are talking about equity and excellence, it is best to make sure that all the challenges aren’t in a few places. We do know that the achievement gap is smaller in schools that mirror the system. We also know that we can’t go above 55 to 60 percent of poor students in a school.”

If there was any consensus on the quality issue, it formed around the notion of assuring that the supply of quality schools is sufficient to meet the demand for such schools. “We want most people to get one of their top choices, but we also have to provide reasonable options to those who don’t,” said Alice Turkel in an interview.

Right now people feel there are good and bad schools. We can’t desegregate through mandatory assignments because parents don’t accept mandatory assignments. Choice won’t work unless we present people with choices they feel good about. Parents should be able to look at eight or nine school, not just five or six. Another alternative school would fill up in a heartbeat, like Cambridgeport. We need maximum use of attracting students and minimum use of mandating.

Turkel suggested that providing more quality offerings would take some time, so she favored postponing the implementation of the new policy for a year. “Some new schools will open in the fall. Give parents time to go and take a look at them,” she said. “People will put their kids in schools where there is hope even though they can’t see beyond second grade. People respond when they think that there will be something good.”

While acknowledging that having an adequate supply of quality schools is essential to the success of controlled choice, some board

members were skeptical that it works the other way around. It is unrealistic, they said, to expect choice per se to lead to school improvement. Improving low performing schools, they argued, requires direct action. “It still goes back to the quality of instruction,” said Denise Simmons, a school committee member in an interview with the author.

Who is teaching the kids? Does the teacher want to teach my poor black grandchild. We need to find out what’s really wrong with the schools. If it’s the teachers, then get more good ones. Each school hires teachers, and schools with poor populations don’t know what to look for and whom to hire. If the problem is leadership, get new principals. If the problem is students, put in more social services. I’m concerned about the focus on marketing when we have concerns about the product. Where’s the conversation about quality of instruction.

When it finally came time to make a decision on December 18, 2001, school committee members approved the superintendent’s proposal to shift to a socioeconomic status-based controlled choice policy by a vote of six to zero. One board member known to be critical of the shift did not cast a vote.

## POLICY CONCLUSIONS

Cambridge’s two decades of experience with controlled choice suggest that a well-designed controlled choice scheme can produce positive benefits that include giving parents a greater say in their child’s education and promoting tolerance and diversity within the system. Over the past two decades, Cambridge has shown that controlled choice can be an effective way of promoting and balancing the particular interests of individual families with broader objectives of the system as a whole. There would seem to be no reason in principle why such an approach could not be replicated in other urban districts.

The experience of Cambridge also suggests that while a pupil assignment system organized around controlled choice will readily identify schools that are underchosen and thus presumably in need of academic improvement, such a system does not guarantee—in and of itself—that the central administration will come to the aid of such schools. Central intervention to raise the quality of low-performing

**schools requires commitment on the part of the school committee and senior administrators not only to make all schools into viable choices for parents but also to enhance the overall quality of the system by improving its weakest elements.**

**Finally, data from Cambridge suggest that using socioeconomic status as the primary basis for achieving enrollment diversity might have a more salutary impact on achievement than the current policy of using race and ethnicity as the basis for diversity. Specifically, these data show that low-income students who are enrolled in schools where there is a good socioeconomic mix of students tend to perform better than low-income students who are enrolled in schools with high proportions either of wealthy or low-income students.**

### **The Example of Morse School**

A good example of how low-performing schools can experience turnarounds under controlled choice is Morse, which hit its nadir ten years ago but now ranks as one of the most popular of Cambridge schools.

Morse is located in a working-class area along the banks of the Charles River and traditionally drew only from the immediate community. By 1990, enrollment had dipped well below the acceptable level of 300 students, and the school was in serious danger of closing. However, the principal, Jim Coady, believed that, despite the fact that Morse backed to a river, it was possible for the school to draw a constituency from across the city. He introduced the Core Knowledge curriculum framework designed by E. D. Hirsch and began developing a staff committed to implementing it. Several key families became interested in the school, and they launched a massive recruiting effort, which included flyers at kindergartens, and worked to build support for the school among local politicians.

Two years ago, Coady was succeeded as principal by Bridget Rodriguez, who had taught for four years in the Amigos two-way bilingual program before serving as an assistant principal at Fletcher. She continued in the same directions as her predecessor,  
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including building up a staff with ownership of the core knowledge approach. The faculty has recently gone through the painstaking process of aligning its curriculum with state standards, and three years ago the school's physical plant was renovated.

By the mid-1990s, word was out that Morse had become the kind of school that many parents wanted. Morse now has an enrollment of 366 students that cuts across class lines and mirrors the city. Half of its students qualify for subsidized price lunch, and 35 percent of students are white, just below the citywide average of 40 percent. Morse has recently become the most popular choice for African Americans, and a quarter of its students are Asian, mainly because it draws young academic families from Harvard and MIT.

In an interview, Magda McCormick, co-chair of the school council and the mother of two students in the school, attributed the turnaround at Morse to the coherence of the curriculum, the building up of a faculty committed to the core knowledge approach, and a general concern with academic achievement. "Lots of other schools do not have a curriculum," she said. "We realize that creativity is fine, but we also need standards." Another important factor, she added, was the fact that several middle-class families rallied around the principal and the school in the early 1990s.

## NOTES

1. Edward B. Fiske, *Smart Schools, Smart Kids* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 169.
2. The total of fifteen elementary schools includes the Amigos bilingual program, which shares facilities with Kennedy but operates as a separate school with its own principal, faculty, and students.
3. Cambridge Public Schools Office of Development and Assessment, Cambridge, Mass. (hereinafter cited as "Office of Development and Assessment").
4. Ibid.
5. This category includes Haitians and other non-African Americans.
6. Office of Development and Assessment.
7. "School Choice in the Kindergarten Registration Process: The Final Report on the 1999 Kindergarten Registration Survey," Office of Development and Assessment, 1999.
8. Fiske, *Smart Schools*, p. 170.
9. Charles V. Willie, "The Evolution of Community Education: Content and Mission," *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 199.
10. Ibid.
11. Superintendent's report to the Cambridge School Committee, April 12, 2001.
12. Office of Development and Assessment.
13. Ibid.
14. Fiske, *Smart Schools*, p. 179.
15. Office of Development and Assessment.
16. "School Choice in the Kindergarten Registration Process: The Final Report on the 2000 Kindergarten Registration Survey," Office of Development and Assessment, May 2000.
17. "School Choice in the Kindergarten Registration Process: The Final Report on the 1999 Kindergarten Registration Survey," Office of Development and Assessment.
18. "The Process of School Choice in the Cambridge Public Schools: The Final Report on the 1998 Kindergarten Registration Survey," Office of Development and Assessment, May 1998.
19. "CCA Struggles for New Image," *Cambridge Chronicle*, October 24, 2001.
20. Barbara Black, Office of Development and Assessment.
21. Nancy Walser, "1998 Parent's Guide to Cambridge Schools" (Cambridge, Mass.: Huron Village Press, 1998), p. 9.
22. Charles V. Willie, George Metzger, Jose Alicea, and Michael Alves, "A Master Plan on the Location of Programs and the Use of Facilities for Cambridge Public Schools," February 1997, p. 5.

23. Cambridge Public Schools Student Data Report, Part 1: 1995–1996, Table 2.
24. Office of Development and Assessment.
25. “MCAS Scores Up Significantly in Cambridge,” *Cambridge Chronicle*, November 7, 2001.
26. Office of Development and Assessment.
27. Willie et al., p. iii.
28. For a discussion of this point in the context of New Zealand, see Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, “When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale,” Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 2000.
29. Cambridge Public Schools, “Controlled Choice Plan,” Cambridge, Mass., November 30, 2001.
30. Office of Development and Assessment.
31. Willie et al., 1997, p. 11.
32. The exception, King, has a high proportion of students whose parents are graduate students, that is., middle class but low income.
33. “Controlled Choice Plan.”
34. Willie, 2000, p. 206.
35. “Controlled Choice Plan.”
36. Ibid.
37. Office of Development and Assessment.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. *Cambridge Chronicle*, October 24, 2001.
41. Ibid.
42. Interview with Terence Smith, chief of staff.
43. “School Chief: Use Income to Place Students,” *Boston Globe*, October 14, 2001, p. 1.
44. Ibid.